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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a survey of West German elementary and secondary school students undertaken to discover their opinions of the West German educational system. Their primary criticism was directed toward: (1) scholastic performance pressure; (2) unrealistic learning objectives; and (3) unsympathetic teachers. Older students were more critical and tended to dislike attending school. Female students appeared to enjoy attending school more, adapted easier, and formed friendships faster than male students did. Early results from similar surveys taken in Sweden, England, and the United States indicated that German students experience less pleasure in school than students from these other countries. West German students perceived education primarily as a means to prepare for future employment and not, as some U.S. students do, for personal enrichment. Level of completed schooling in West Germany continues to be the primary determinant of professional and social opportunities. Poor grades can lead to stress in the form of headaches, vertigo, nervousness, abdominal pain, insomnia, and conflicts with parents. (JHP)

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PUPILS TODAY: GREATER STRESS AND FRUSTRATION

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Inter Nationes
Bonn, West Germany

PUPILS TODAY:

Greater stress and frustration

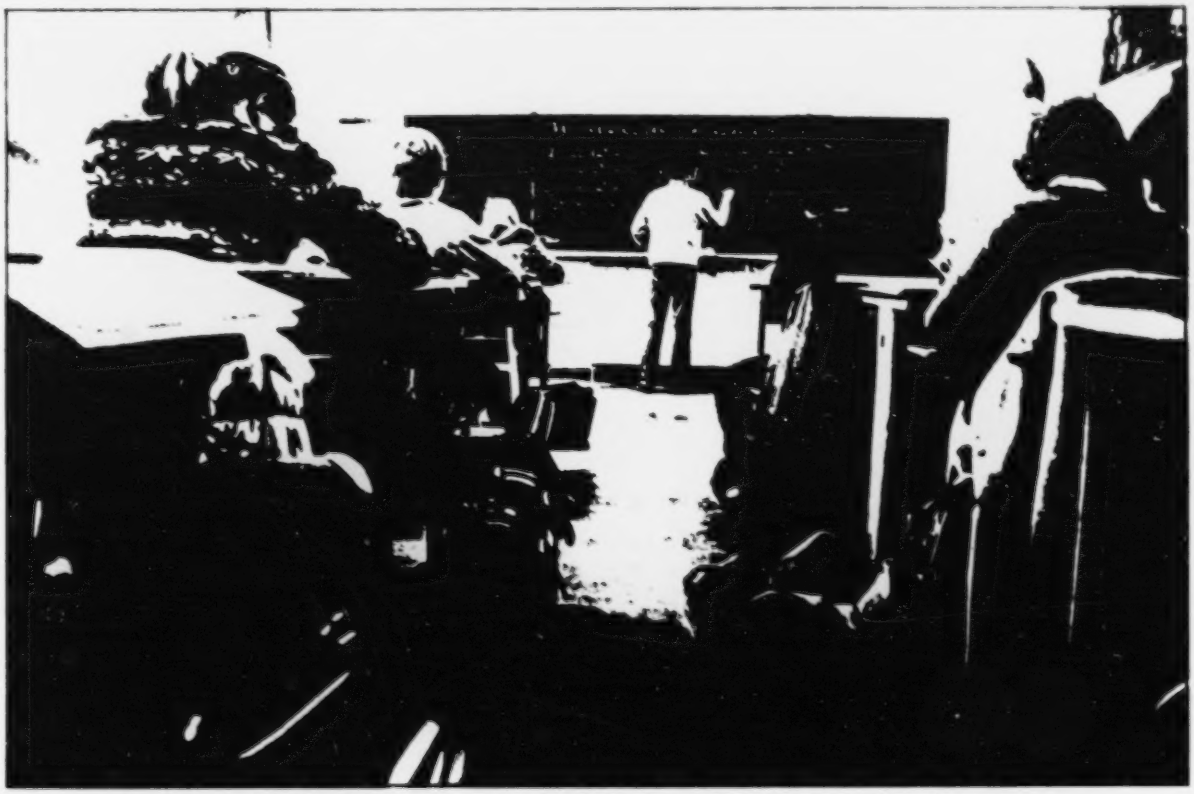
Compared internationally, the answers in German surveys are more critical

"School is a concrete block in which you learn. You mostly learn unnecessary rubbish." (A girl pupil from Class/Grade 9.)

"The Education Ministry ought to look into whether the learning material has any real purpose. Often we go through junk which never turns up again in later life. In maths, for instance, you suffer excentric convulsions, you're all at sea." (Gymnasium pupil from Class/Grade 12.) These are but two of countless similar quotations from 6,863 essays written by pupils at schools in the Federal Republic of Germany — which were recently evaluated and published within the framework of a research project.

The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) gave its financial support to this "Internationale Untersuchung von Schülerurteilen über die Schulen" (INSCHUR) — International Study of Pupils Assessments of Schools — to discover how pupils experience, describe and assess the daily scholastic round. The results surprised both the DFG and the researchers: German pupils in Classes/Grades 4 to 13 have a far more critical attitude to school than the study anticipated. It differs quite markedly from that of similarly-aged pupils in Sweden, Great Britain and the USA. Apparently, German pupils experience their school as a permanent examination and grading institution, marring all pleasure in school. Even good and above-average pupils suffer from the marking.

In this anonymous survey, the majority of pupils gave their opinion in an outspoken manner. The main points they criticize are scholastic performance pressure, unrealistic learning material and allegedly unsympathetic teachers. The pupils made little reference to teaching methods, teaching materials or scholastic co-determination.



Performance pressure and "unrealistic subject-matter" are the main criticisms in a pupil survey. In our photo: a school class in Gelsenkirchen.

The members of the research project "Was Schüler von der Schule halten" — What Pupils think of School — surmise that educationalists have obviously been concerned with other problems in the education system over the last few years — rather than those which determine the pupils' daily image.

The older the pupils, the more critical their assessment, the less they like going to school. Much to the surprise of political education experts, the Realschule (Intermediate School) came in for very heavy criticism from its pupils. More than their counterparts at Gymnasium (Grammar School), they gripe about their teachers. Girls seem to like going to school more than boys, are more willing to adapt and strike up friendships more quickly.

Although similar sample surveys of Swedish, British and American schools have still not been concluded, the authors of the comparative pupil studies come to the conclusion that German pupils apparently experience the least pleasure in school. Only Grundschule (Primary School) pupils up to and including Class/Grade 4 like going to school, for the most part. From Class/Grade 10 onwards, the majority of the pupils asked, stated: School is not a pleasure. Only 22 percent of the German pupils approached like going to school — as opposed to 42 percent of the American pupils.

"The subject of grades, reports, achievement, viewed over the school years, makes it evident that performance requirements and examination of performance level hang like a millstone round German pupils' necks," it states in the study on the subject of marks and performance pressure. This aspect of school, in turn, is the most negatively assessed by Classes/Grades 10 to 13, headed, first and foremost, by Gymnasium pupils.

Summing up, on the basis of the findings of the study on German pupils' satisfaction with school, it can be said that they see the purpose of scholastic demands mainly as preparation for subsequent professional life (34 percent), and, unlike American pupils, less as the acquisition of personal education (16 percent). American pupils attach greater importance than their German counterparts to the idea that school can help contribute to the formation of personality. One possible reason for this, the researchers feel, is the fact that vocational preparation in the Federal Republic of Germany plays a more prominent part than it does in the United States. This can be explained by the fact that scholastic qualifications are much more important in the choice of career than in the USA where they tend more to ask "What can you do?" rather than "What certificates can you offer?"

Here, the experts note, on the one hand, that the pupils make every effort to obtain better, formal final school certificates — frequently at the urging of their parents: on the other hand, that the greater the number of pupils gaining such qualifications, the less value they have. Be that as it may, the researchers point out, school in the Federal Republic of Germany is still regarded as the central agency determining subsequent professional and social opportunities. One indication of this is the growing trend towards higher educational qualifications. In 1979, 37 percent of all parents wanted their children to acquire Abitur (Higher School Certificate and studies entitlement). This figure rose to 45 percent in 1981, 51 percent in 1983 and — to quote the latest available figure — 54 percent in 1986.

Such high-flying educational aims and the partially unconfessed fear of social decline lead to psychic stress and conflict between parents and pupils in the case of poor grades in school. These same findings were obtained by a sample survey conducted by a Bielefeld research group, and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. Accordingly, 54 percent of all Realschule pupils, 53 percent of Gymnasium pupils, 43 percent of Hauptschule (Main School) pupils and 49 percent of Gesamtschule (Comprehensive School) pupils have regular altercations with their parents because of their performance problems in school. After questioning 1,700 pupils, the researchers attribute these conflicts to the ambitious plans of most parents and pupils: even 83 percent of the 13 to 16-year-old Gymnasium pupils said they wanted to obtain their Abitur. In other types of school, too, the wish to acquire the entitlement to enter higher education is growing more and more urgent. The slightest signs of poor scholastic performance trigger correspondingly nervous reactions on behalf of parents and pupils.

Admittedly, half of those asked are not sure if they will obtain the desired final certificate, 65 percent doubt whether they will be able to fulfil their professional aspirations. In the opinion of the experts, this uncertainty in regard to orientation results in psychic stress, symptomatically manifest in such complaints as headaches, vertigo, nervousness, abdominal pains and insomnia. The experts' objective in this study is to arouse understanding for the complicated demands confronting young persons. They call on parents to approach their children's school problems in a relaxed manner to avoid influencing the development process of these young persons.